Aṭlāl

On the Persistence of *"That Which Remains"*

Iraj Esmaeilpour Ghoochani

Soon I shall become part of the oblivion of which this world is made.

—Borges

Aṭlāl (أطلال; singular: *ṭalal*) literally means "ruins," "vestiges," or "traces of an abandoned dwelling." In pre Islamic Arabic poetry, especially in the *qaṣīda*, the poet traditionally begins by stopping before the deserted campsite of the beloved, contemplating the remaining traces of a vanished encampment. This opening motif, known as the *nasīb*, became one of the defining features of *shiʿr al jāhilī* (pre Islamic Arabic poetry). More than a literary convention, *aṭlāl* articulates a particular structure of memory, absence, and desire: the beloved has disappeared, yet her traces remain. The motif exerted a lasting influence on Persian literature and Sufism, where it reappears in transformed form in the notion of *kharābāt* (خرابات, "the ruin"), a central symbolic space in Persian mystical poetry. While the Bedouin poet stands before the abandoned campsite, the Sufi often dwells within the ruin itself. In both cases, the ruin functions as a privileged site where absence becomes visible through its traces. In the present essay, *aṭlāl* is approached not merely as a poetic motif but as a theory of the trace, a meditation on how loss persists in the form of a remainder.

A man returns after many years to the place where his beloved once lived. He arrives at the campsite. The people are gone. The tents are gone. The beloved is gone. Nothing remains except traces. A few marks in the sand. The remains of a fireplace. The outlines of a vanished dwelling. The poet stops and begins to speak.

This scene stands at the beginning of countless pre Islamic Arabic poems. Arab literary scholars call it *al wuquf ʿala al aṭlāl* الوقوف على الاطلال : stopping and standing before the ruins. Modern commentators usually explain it through

nostalgia, tribal loyalty, lost love, or the emotional consequences of nomadic life.[1] Such explanations are certainly valuable. Yet they leave a peculiar question unanswered. What is the source of this much passion for the ruin? Why the poet *stops* (before the ruins)? Why should a trace become more precious than the thing it traces?

Maybe the poet has discovered that what survives loss is often more powerful than what was lost. The beloved has disappeared. The ruin remains.

A related anecdote, found in various Persian and Sufi retellings of the Layli and Majnun story (the Iranian Romeo and Juliet), pushes this logic even further. Layli finally appears before Majnun after years of separation. Yet Majnun remains occupied with writing her name. Annoyed, Layli asks why he continues to write when she herself is now present. The paradox is striking. Presence fails to interrupt inscription. The beloved cannot compete with her own trace:

Laylá Visits Majnun in the Wilderness. From a manuscript of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi's Khamsa. Mughal India, 1597–1598. Ink and pigments on paper.[2] This miniature depicts one of the most revealing moments in the Layli and Majnun tradition. Layli appears before Majnun in the wilderness, yet the encounter takes place within a landscape already transformed by absence. The scene recalls the logic of *aṭlāl :* the beloved is present, yet desire continues to circulate around the remainder rather than the immediately given. The dark object before Majnun may be read as a writing tablet or manuscript, an interpretation consistent with the recurring motif of Majnun inscribing Layli's name. Whether writing or not, Majnun's posture suggests absorption in a trace rather than in direct possession. The image therefore visualizes a central theme of this article: desire does not attach itself to the object alone but to the remainder through which the object survives absence. The trace becomes more enduring than presence itself. Layli visits Majnun, yet between them remains what Nizami calls *"that which remains"* (*آنچه مانده بر جای*).[3] The miniature thus

[1] Check for instance: "Al-Atlāl ," Grokipedia, accessed June 20, 2026, https://grokipedia.com/page/al_atlāl .

[2] "Laylá Visits Majnun in the Wilderness, 1597-1598 (Mughal). Acquired by Henry Walters, W.624.115A | The Walters Art Museum," *Online Collection of the Walters Art Museum*, n.d., accessed June 20, 2026, https://art.thewalters.org/object/W.624.115A/.

[3] "گنجور » نظامی » خمسه » لیلی و مجنون » بخش ۴۱ - غزل خواندن مجنون نزد لیلی," accessed June 20, 2026, https://ganjoor.net/nezami/5ganj/leyli-majnoon/sh41/.

stages a meeting that never fully abolishes separation. Love seeks the even number as pairing, but desire persists through the remainder. Majnun remains *fard*; alone, odd, unpaired; among the traces that sustain his passion.

This episode reveals something essential about desire. The object of desire is not the beloved. The object is the remainder once represented by the beloved. Desire does not emerge because the beloved disappears. It emerges because the beloved was never fully present in the first place. Something within the beloved always exceeded possession, representation, and completion. Loss does not create this remainder. Loss merely reveals it. More precisely, loss represents it once again. It functions as a *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*: a representative that stands in the place of an impossibility already present within the object itself. The remainder does not appear directly. It can only be encountered through successive representatives. Majnun therefore remains attached not to Layli herself but to the trace through which Layli survives. What is writing other than a trace? A written word is already a remainder. It survives the disappearance of the voice that once pronounced it. In this sense, writing possesses the same structure as the ruin. The ruin survives the disappearance of the house. Writing survives the disappearance of speech. This may explain why Majnun gradually becomes attached to Layli's name. The name is not merely a substitute for the beloved. The name preserves the remainder that the beloved herself could only temporarily embody. The written name becomes more substantial than the beloved because it condenses absence within presence. The beloved comes and goes. The written trace remains.

Al Aṭlāl : A Ruin That Sings. *Al Aṭlāl* (*The Ruins*) is one of the most beloved songs in the Arab world, performed by Oum Kalthoum in 1966 and inspired by the ancient Arabic motif of standing before the traces of a vanished beloved. كان صرحاً من خيالٍ فهـوى/ يا فـؤادي لا تسل أين الهوى (O my heart, do not ask where love has gone/ It was a palace of imagination, and it fell.)[4] From a ethno-topological perspective, *aṭlāl* is not nostalgia. It is an encounter with what remains. The beloved disappears. The ruin remains. The trace survives the presence. For more than a thousand years, Arab culture has returned to this same scene: a solitary figure standing before a remainder. *Al Aṭlāl* is not a song about ruins. It is a ruin that sings.[5]

Majnun does not simply prefer the name to Layli. The name has become more fleshy than the beloved herself. The word acquires a body. The trace acquires weight. The signifier becomes denser than what it signifies. At this point the

[4] كلمات أغاني "الأطلال," كلمات أغاني, accessed June 20, 2026,

[5] Amazigh Mood, *Al Atlāl Oum Kalthoum* - الأطلال أم كلثوم - كلثوميات, 2022, 33:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogm2HlKJVqU.

story approaches the structure of dreaming. In dreams, symbols become more real than what they symbolize.[6] Majnun inhabits precisely such a world. Layli becomes a name. The name becomes writing. The writing becomes a landscape. Eventually the entire desert becomes a page upon which the beloved survives as a trace.

At this point the distinction between writing and landscape begins to dissolve. The desert becomes a page, and the traces left upon it become a form of calligraphy. Hafiz evokes a similar image when he writes:

چه جای شکر و شکایت ز نقش نیک و بد است؟
چو بر صحیفهٔ عالم رقم نخواهد ماند

Why praise or complain about good and evil inscriptions,

when no mark/number will remain upon the page of the world?

The world itself appears inside this cultural conceptualization as a manuscript. Human lives become inscriptions upon its surface. Yet the verse introduces a further twist. If no inscription remains, then every mark is a trace (*khat*): a remainder destined not to remain. The page of the world is itself an *aṭlāl* , a surface upon which disappearance continually writes its signature: a ruin of writing upon which oblivion continually rehearses its calligraphy.. Every trace bears witness not only to what once was, but also to its own future erasure.

The poet of *aṭlāl* performs the same operation. The beloved disappears. The ruin remains. The ruin becomes the written name of the beloved upon the earth itself.

Both cases, desire has shifted from the object to its remainder. This still needs some explanations:

At this point, Majnun's attachment to writing becomes easier to understand. The name has become more compelling than the beloved herself. What is writing, after all, if not a trace?

The Persian word *khat* خط means both writing and line. A line is already a trace. It marks the passage of something that is no longer there. A footprint is a trace. A furrow is a trace. A scar is a trace. Writing belongs to the same family. Every written word is the trace of a voice that has departed. Every letter bears witness to an absence.

This is why Majnun's passion for writing Layli's name should not be understood as a substitution for Layli. It is a reduction toward Layli's essence. The beloved gradually sheds her accidental qualities. Her body disappears. Her gestures disappear. Her voice disappears. What remains is her name. Then even the name is reduced to writing. The beloved becomes a line. A trace. A Spur.

---

[6] Check my definition for dream in my desertation: "*Dream is a scene or space in which the symbols are more significant than what they symbolize. In other words, dream is a space in which the signifier takes the features of the signified: A space in which the Word takes Flesh.*" Iraj Esmaeilpour Ghoochani, "Bābā Āb Dād" (Text.PhDThesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2017, p.38), https://edoc.ub.uni-muenchen.de/21528/.

The double meaning of the English word *left* is instructive here. **What is *left* is what remains. Yet what is *left* is also what has departed and *left* us behind. The remainder and the departure are hidden within the same word.** Layli is no longer present, yet something is *left*. The line (*khat*) is what is *left* of the one who has *left*.

From this perspective, a signifier is not merely a sign. A signifier is a trace. It points toward something that can never be fully recovered. The signifier survives because the thing itself has withdrawn.

A simple mathematical example may help clarify this point. Consider the number √2. We often write it approximately as 1.4, 1.41, 1.414, and so on. Each approximation comes closer to the number, yet none ever reaches it completely. The German mathematician Richard Dedekind proposed that such numbers should not be understood as incomplete approximations to a hidden object. Rather, the very impossibility of completing the approximation is what defines the number. The cut, the impossibility of closure, is not outside the number. It constitutes the number. The number has no gap, it is the gap.[7]

The same logic appears in *aṭlāl* . **The beloved is not first present and then lost. Rather, loss gradually reveals what the beloved always was.** Just as the gap is not external to an irrational number but constitutes its very being, the remainder is not external to the beloved but constitutes her singularity. The beloved is not reduced to a trace because she has been lost. The beloved becomes a trace because the trace is what remains after every accidental attribute has fallen away.

In this sense, loss is not the destruction of essence but its revelation. The ruin does not preserve a fragment of the house. **The ruin reveals what the house had been concealing all along: the trasure of the signifier. The same may be said of love. What survives loss is not less than the beloved. It is the beloved reduced to her irreducible remainder.**

Majnun's writing therefore performs a paradoxical operation. By reducing Layli to a name, and the name to a line, he does not move away from her. He approaches her singularity. The trace becomes more precious than the beloved because the trace carries what cannot be lost. The line becomes more fleshy than the body because it preserves the remainder that made the body lovable in the first place.

A further resonance emerges when we consider the names themselves. Laylā derives from *layl*, the Arabic word for night. Majnūn derives from a root meaning concealment, covering, hiddenness. The lover of the night is himself hidden within the night.

This association acquires a visual form in the tradition of *siyāh-mashq*. As the calligrapher repeats words and letters, the page gradually darkens. Writing accumulates until the traces merge into a field of blackness. The exercise ceases to represent its object and begins to embody it:

---

[7] Check my article: “Réel,” accessed June 20, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/168304897/R%C3%A9el.

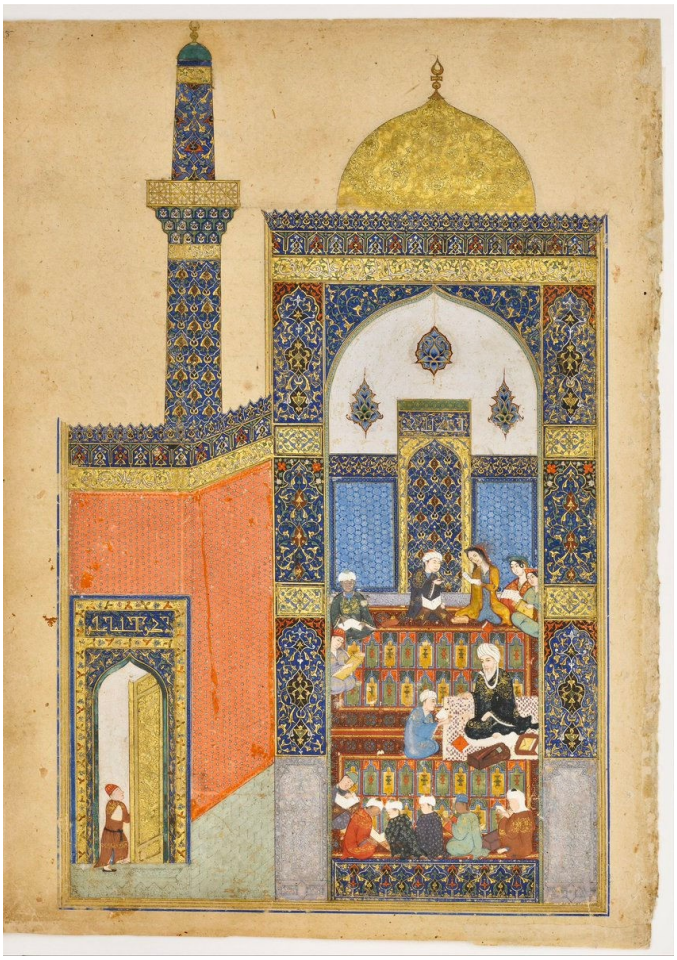
Siyāh-Mashq by Mirza Reza Kalhor. The Persian tradition of *siyāh-mashq* (black practice) offers a striking visual parallel to Majnun's writing of Layli's name. Originally, *mashq* referred to an exercise. The calligrapher repeated letters, words, and combinations in order to prepare for a future masterpiece. The exercise was not the goal. It was merely a means. Yet, the exercise gradually became autonomous. The repeated traces acquired their own beauty. The preparation became the work itself. What was originally secondary became primary. Writing Layli's name begins aslo as a means of remembering the beloved. Gradually the writing itself becomes the object of passion. Majnun no longer writes in order to reach Layli. He dwells within the act of writing. The trace acquires a density that exceeds the object from which it originated. In this sense, *siyāh-mashq* may be understood as a visual form of *aṭlāl* . What survives, the remainder, is not merely a fragment of the original object but the very operation that once sought to reach it. Melancholia emerges at precisely this point. The loss is no longer experienced as a simple absence. The lost object survives within its traces.

Indeed, the traces may become more compelling than the object itself. Just as the calligrapher becomes absorbed in the repeated line, Majnun becomes absorbed in the repeated name. The exercise becomes the artwork. The trace becomes the beloved. The remainder becomes the object of desire. The beloved becomes a name, the name becomes a trace, and the traces eventually produce a darkness that recalls Laylā herself. The page becomes nocturnal. Writing ceases to point toward the beloved and begins to take on her qualities. The signifier thickens into substance.

What appears at first to be repetition is therefore a process of condensation. The beloved is reduced to a trace, yet the trace acquires increasing density. The result is not disappearance but concentration. Laylā becomes a line, the lines become darkness, and the darkness becomes a new mode of her presence.

Yet the ruin is not simply a substitute for the beloved. Nor has the ruin become desirable because the beloved is absent. The situation is more complicated. The ruin itself is a remainder. What attracts the poet is not the lost house but the residue that survives within the ruin. This residue possesses the same structure as what Lacan would later call the object cause of desire, the objet petit a. The object causes desire not because it is complete but because

something within it remains unresolved. Desire emerges around a gap that cannot be closed.



***Layla and Majnun at School*. Folio from a *Khamsa* of Nizami of Ganja, 1431–32 CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art.** [8] The story of Layla and Majnun (Iranian Romeo and Juliet) begins not in the desert but in a school. This is significant. In Persian, the word *mashq* means both writing exercise and arduous practice: مشقت. Historically, it also carries connotations of effort, discipline, suffering, and passion. Years later, Majnun will sit alone (*fard*) in the desert writing Layla's name upon the sand.[9] That famous scene is already prefigured here. The school exercise becomes a love exercise. The copybook becomes the desert. The written letter becomes the trace of an absent beloved. Now, Majnun's writing on the sand is a form of *aṭlāl* . The beloved has disappeared, yet a remainder persists. Layla becomes a name. The name becomes writing. The writing becomes a trace destined to vanish. Their love does not begin with possession but with inscription. The desert scene is therefore not a departure from the school. It is its continuation i.e. its remainder. The child practicing letters becomes the lover preserving remainders. The entire arc of the story stretches between two forms of *mashq*: the schoolboy learning to write and the lover writing upon the sand. Between them lies the birth of desire, where the beloved gradually becomes a name, the name a trace, and the trace a ruin that refuses to disappear.

The beloved was never a complete object.The house was never a complete house. Both contained an irreducible residue from the beginning. Loss does not create this residue. Loss merely reveals it.

A remarkable passage from Nizami's *Layli and Majnun* allows us to approach the problem of the remainder from another angle. Majnun declares:

بسیار کسان ترا غلام‌اند
اما نه چو من مطیع نام‌اند

[8] BAYT AL FANN, “Layla and Majnun - A Love Story,” Bayt Al Fann, June 14, 2023, https://www.baytalfann.com/post/layla-and-majnun-a-love-story.

[9] “گنجور » جامی » هفت اورنگ » سلامان و ابسال » بخش ۱۲ - حکایت مجنون که در بادیه از انگشت قلم کرده بر تخته ریگ چون رمالان رقمی می زد گفتند این نوشتن چیست و این نوشته برای کیست گفت این نام لیلی است که به نوشتن آن می نازم چون او به دست نیست با نام او عشق می بازم,” accessed June 20, 2026, https://ganjoor.net/jami/7ourang/7-2/sh12/.

Many are your servants,

*but none obey your **name** as I do.*[10]

At first glance, the verse appears to be a conventional expression of devotion. Yet the wording is highly precise. Majnun does not claim obedience to Layli herself. He claims obedience to her name. The signifier has begun to eclipse the object. Desire has shifted from the beloved to the trace through which the beloved survives. Layli has become a name.

The passage then develops into an extended meditation on unity and number:

زین پس تو و من، من و تو زین پس
یک دل به میان ما دو تن بس

Henceforth, you and I, I and you,

one heart is enough for our two bodies.

Majnun dreams of abolishing duality. Two bodies should become one heart. The language is unmistakably mathematical. The lovers aspire to pass from two to one.

A few lines later, Nizami makes this numerical logic entirely explicit:

در خود کشمت که رشته یکتاست
تا این دو عدد شود یکی راست

I shall draw you into myself, for the thread is one,

until these two numbers become truly one.

The expression is extraordinary. The lovers are no longer merely persons. They have become numbers. **Love appears as an operation that seeks to transform two into one.** The fantasy is that of perfect coincidence, perfect symmetry, complete union.

Yet something prevents this operation from ever reaching completion. The clue appears near the end of the passage:

من با توام آنچه مانده بر جای
کفشی است برون فتاده از پای

*What **remains** between me and you*

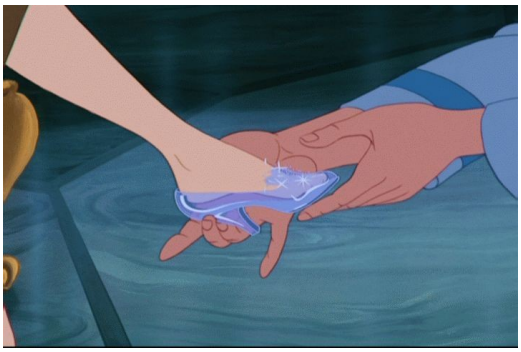
*is no more than **a shoe fallen from the foot.***

The crucial phrase is *anche mandeh bar jay*: that which remains. What remains. What is left over. What survives: The remainder enters the poem directly. Now, the poem is not merely about union. It is about the impossibility of union. If two truly became one, nothing would remain other than a shoe fallen from the foot: Signifier. No difference, no distance, no desire, no poetry. Yet the poem continues because something persists. A residue survives every attempt at fusion. Nizami gives this residue a remarkable figure: *"a shoe fallen from the*

[10] "گنجور » نظامی » خمسه » لیلی و مجنون » بخش ۴۱ - غزل خواندن مجنون نزد لیلی."

foot.” The image is far from accidental. A shoe is neither the foot nor entirely separate from it. It preserves the form of an absent body. It is a trace, an imprint, a remainder. In this respect, the shoe functions much like a signifier. The foot withdraws, but the shoe remains. The beloved withdraws, but the name remains. Presence recedes, but the trace persists. The shoe therefore does not represent an insignificant leftover. It represents the very condition of desire though through a negative cast. Like a photographic negative, it preserves the structure of what has disappeared. The foot is absent, yet its form remains inscribed in the shoe. The negative image is not the opposite of the positive image. It contains the positive image in another state. Likewise, the shoe contains the absent foot as its hollow form, its imprint, its trace.

The same logic appears in the story of Cinderella. Presence leaves behind a form that survives its departure.



Cinderella's Slipper. The slipper is a negative cast of an absent foot, preserving its form after its departure. Like the ruin in *aṭlāl* or the name in Majnun's poetry, it is not a substitute for the beloved but the contour of an absence. The slipper is the ruin of the foot.

The relation between the beloved and the name follows a similar structure. The name is not a diminished version of the beloved. It is the negative cast of the beloved. The beloved withdraws, but her contours persist within the signifier. The word preserves the form of an absence.

The same may be said of the relation between spirit and matter, or, in Hegel's language, between *Geist* and *Knochen*. Spirit does not simply inhabit matter. Matter becomes the trace through which spirit survives its withdrawal. Bone is the negative cast of life. Writing is the negative cast of speech. The ruin is the negative cast of the house. The signifier is the negative cast of what can never be fully present.

Seen from this perspective, the remainder is not a fragment detached from the whole. It is the form through which the whole persists after its disappearance. **What remains is not less than the thing. It is the thing reduced to its structure.**

At this point, a remarkable verse of Rumi acquires a new significance:

بود عاشق فراق اندر چو اسمی خالی از معنی
ولی معنی چو معشوقی فراقت دارد از اسما

The lover inhabits separation and difference, like a name emptied of meaning;

yet meaning itself, like the beloved, remains deferred from names.

Placed beside Nizami's fallen shoe, the verse reveals another dimension of the remainder. The *shoe* preserves the form of the absent foot. Yet it is no longer the *foot*. Likewise, the name preserves the contour of the beloved while remaining separated from her presence.

Rumi's "name emptied of meaning" should not be understood as a failed signifier. Quite the opposite. The signifier begins to reveal itself in its pure state. What remains is not meaning but trace. Not reference but inscription. Not the beloved but the contour of her withdrawal. One might even say that this is the point at which language approaches what Lacan later called *lalangue*. The signifier ceases to function merely as a vehicle of communication and begins to acquire its own density, rhythm, and materiality. The name becomes a thing. The trace becomes fleshy.

Rumi's verse unexpectedly anticipates the double movement that Derrida later condensed into the word *différance*. The lover experiences *firāq*: separation, distance, difference. Yet meaning itself remains beyond immediate presence, continually *deferred* from the names that seek to capture it. **The beloved is not simply absent. She withdraws into a horizon that can be approached but never exhausted.** Majnun's repeated writing of Layli's name exemplifies precisely such a movement. The beloved withdraws. The name remains. The name is repeated until it darkens the page. Meaning gradually gives way to inscription. The signifier acquires weight. What appears at first to be separation becomes a new mode of presence.

The shoe fallen from the foot, the name separated from meaning, the ruin separated from the house: all belong to the same family of forms. They are not simply remnants of what has disappeared. They are negative casts preserving the structure of an absence. Like a photographic negative brought through the developing process, they reveal that what appears lost has not vanished entirely. It persists as structure. Presence withdraws, but its contours remain.

Marcel Proust and the madeleine. The madeleine is a ruin in miniature. A small sensory trace suddenly unfolds an entire vanished world. Like the ruins of *aṭlāl* , Layli's name, or Cinderella's slipper, it preserves not the object itself but the

structure of its absence. The lost world returns because a remainder has survived.[11]

Without such a remainder, union would be complete and the poem would end. The signifier survives because something in the beloved cannot be absorbed into presence. **What remains after every attempt at becoming one is not an obstacle to love. It is the condition that allows love, desire, and poetry to continue.** This logic is surprisingly close to that of odd and even numbers. An even number divides perfectly. It leaves nothing behind. An odd number, by contrast, always preserves a remainder. Something refuses incorporation into symmetry. Something remains unpaired.

This observation sheds new light on the Persian and Arabic word *fard* فرد. The word means an odd number, but it also means solitary, unique, alone, individual, without a counterpart. The mathematical and existential meanings coincide. The odd number is solitary because it contains a remainder. The solitary person is odd because he remains after pairing has failed.

Majnun occupies precisely this position. Throughout the story he is repeatedly described as *fard*, alone in the desert. He dreams of becoming one with Layli, yet every attempt at unity generates another remainder. The beloved becomes a name. The name becomes writing. The writing becomes poetry. The poem itself becomes the remainder of a love that cannot complete itself. **The beloved becomes a trace, and the lover becomes a trace of himself.** This transformation is already inscribed in their names. Laylā derives from *layl*, the Arabic word for night. As Majnun repeats her name, the page gradually darkens. The beloved becomes writing, the writing becomes *siyāh-mashq*, and *siyāh-mashq* becomes night.

At the same time, the lover undergoes a parallel metamorphosis. Majnun was not born Majnun. His given name was Qays al ʿĀmirī. "Majnun" is a second name, acquired through love. Derived from the root *j-n-n*, associated with concealment, covering, and hiddenness, it signifies one who has become veiled from ordinary sight.. The same root appears in jinn (جن), the invisible beings of Arabic and Islamic tradition, so called because they are hidden from ordinary sight. Related words include janīn (جنين), the fetus concealed within the womb, and jannah (جنة), originally an enclosed or hidden garden. Majnun is therefore not simply "mad." Etymologically, he is "the hidden one," a man withdrawn from the visible world. His transformation from Qays into Majnun thus mirrors the movement explored throughout this article: the lover gradually disappears into the trace of the beloved, becoming a remainder of himself. The lover receives a new name precisely by losing the old one.

Qays is no longer simply himself. He has become Majnun, the hidden one. Laylā is also no longer merely a person. She has become a name, a line, a darkness. Both have been transformed by the same operation. The beloved is reduced to a trace. The lover is reduced to a trace of himself. Their union

[11] Image: “Pin auf History,” Pinterest, accessed June 21, 2026, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/399694535658388728/.

therefore does not occur through possession or intersection. It occurs through a shared withdrawal. In the language of Euler diagrams, they do not become one by overlapping. They become one by dissolving into the same field. Love achieves what presence cannot: a union through remainder.

This is the deepest structure of melancholia: The lost object does not simply disappear; It survives as a trace. Yet the lover who remains faithful to that trace also undergoes the same fate. Majnun becomes the remainder of a love that cannot complete itself: he is lost (majnun), gone, just like the beloved. Like Laylā, he survives in transformed form. The beloved becomes night. The lover becomes hiddenness. Both persist as remainders within the same darkness as the void. In this sense, the tragedy of Majnun is not that he cannot become one with Layli. The tragedy is that every attempt to become one produces a remainder. **Love dreams of the even number. Desire survives through the odd number.**

Again, the same structure appears in the poetry of *aṭlāl* . The beloved disappears. The ruin remains. Presence seeks completion, but the remainder persists. **The solitary poet standing before the ruins is therefore not merely remembering a lost beloved. He has himself become the remainder left behind by a melancholic division that never fully resolved itself. The history of desire may ultimately be nothing more than the history of these remainders. Not the objects we possess, but the traces that survive them. Not the beloved, but the name. Not the house, but the ruin. Not the two that become one, but the one that remains after every attempt at becoming two has failed.**

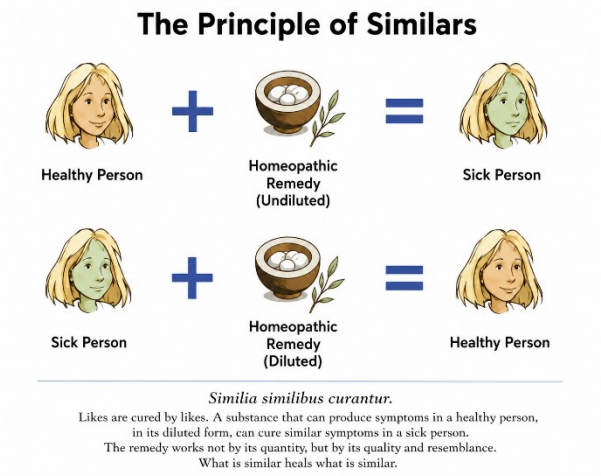
The ruin therefore does not replace the beloved. The ruin reproduces the structure that made the beloved desirable in the first place. A remainder encounters another remainder. The same wound recognizes itself in a different material. Stone replaces flesh. Trace replaces presence.

This may explain why the scene possesses such therapeutic power. The poet does not return in order to recover the beloved. Recovery is impossible. He returns because the ruin carries the same topology as the lost object. It contains the same unresolved kernel around which desire had once been organized.

The ancient homeopathic principle *similia similibus curantur*, the same is cured by the same: The wound is not healed through its elimination but through the encounter with another wound of the same structure. The ruin cures because it is itself wounded. The left-over consoles because it redraws the contour of the withdrawn and left object. At this point we may begin to understand why the motif became so central within a nomadic culture. The ruin is not the opposite of the beloved. It is the beloved translated into another medium (check notions of Don. Kunze on “the Wizard of the Oz” Vanda Conference)[12]. The poet stands before the ruins because they preserve, in architectural form, the very impossibility that once animated love.

[12] Boundary Language, *Vanda Conference, Wien, Don. Kunze’s Presentation*, 2025, 22:36, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hym5id2MGaA.

The ancient homeopathic principle *similia similibus curantur* teaches that the same is cured by the same. The wound is not healed through its elimination but through an encounter with another wound of the same structure. The remedy does not oppose the illness. It reproduces its form in a transformed state. The logic of *aṭlāl* follows a similar path. The ruin cures because it is itself wounded. The trace consoles because it redraws the contour of what has withdrawn and left us behind. Like a photographic negative, the remainder preserves the structure of an absence while simultaneously making new appearances possible. The lost object returns, not in its original presence, but in a form that can be inhabited, contemplated, and reproduced.


The Principle of Similars
Healthy Person
Homeopathic Remedy (Undiluted)
Sick Person
Sick Person
Homeopathic Remedy (Diluted)
Healthy Person
Similia similibus curantur.
Likes are cured by likes. A substance that can produce symptoms in a healthy person, in its diluted form, can cure similar symptoms in a sick person.
The remedy works not by its quantity, but by its quality and resemblance.
What is similar heals what is similar.

The remainder therefore functions as a remedy. It offers no restoration of what has been lost. Instead, it preserves the very gap through which desire continues to live. The anxiety of *aṭlāl* therefore differs from ordinary nostalgia. Nostalgia longs for a lost presence. The poet of the ruins fears the disappearance of an absence. He returns not merely to remember but to verify that something still remains to be re-membered.

This observation helps us understand why so many classical Arabic poems begin with ruins rather than with love. This literary structure did not disappear with the rise of Islam. On the contrary, it left a profound imprint upon one of the most central spatial concepts of Persian Sufism: *kharābāt* (خرابات), literally "the ruin", خرابه. **The ruin is the second station of desire: The beloved has disappeared; The trace remains. Desire shifts from the object to its remainder.**

The *kharābāt* is therefore not merely a ruined building, nor simply a tavern in the conventional Sufi sense. It is a space organized around absence. What has been lost persists there as a trace. The ruin becomes habitable because desire no longer seeks immediate possession. It learns to dwell among remnants.

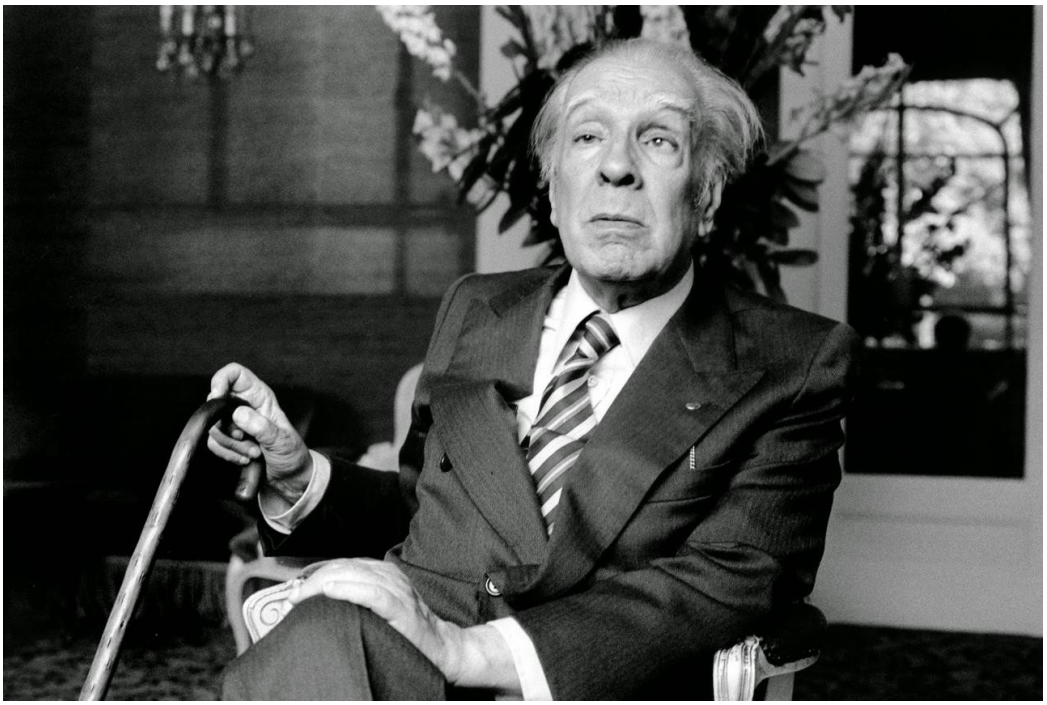
From this perspective, the kharābāt appears as a spiritualized form of *aṭlāl* . The Bedouin poet stands before the abandoned campsite. The Sufi enters the ruin itself. In both cases, the object has withdrawn, yet its remainder continues to generate meaning, memory, and desire.

The “Lady” has vanished. The ruin remains. The trace becomes a dwelling.In one of Borges' essays there appears a reference to an ancient Arabic verse whose source I have never been able to locate. The verse says approximately: "I visited the home of my beloved. Nothing had changed. It was the same ruin it had always been." Whether the quotation is authentic is almost beside the point.

The point could never missed.[13] Its structure is extraordinary: The poet encounters an *aṭlāl* within an *aṭlāl* . He returns to a ruin only to discover that the ruin itself has remained unchanged. A memory encounters the remains of a previous memory. A remainder encounters another remainder. The scene becomes recursive. The beloved is gone. The camp remains. The camp is revisited, only to reveal that it too has become a trace. The poet stands not before an object but before a history of disappearances layered upon one another. **The ruin is already remembering its own ruin.**

The same recursive structure appears in language. Words are traces whose origins have long been forgotten. Beneath their practical use lies a sedimented history of metaphors, losses, substitutions, and poetic inventions. Language is inhabited by forgotten memories of itself. Every word is an *aṭlāl* . Every signifier is the remainder of a previous encounter whose origin can no longer be fully recovered.

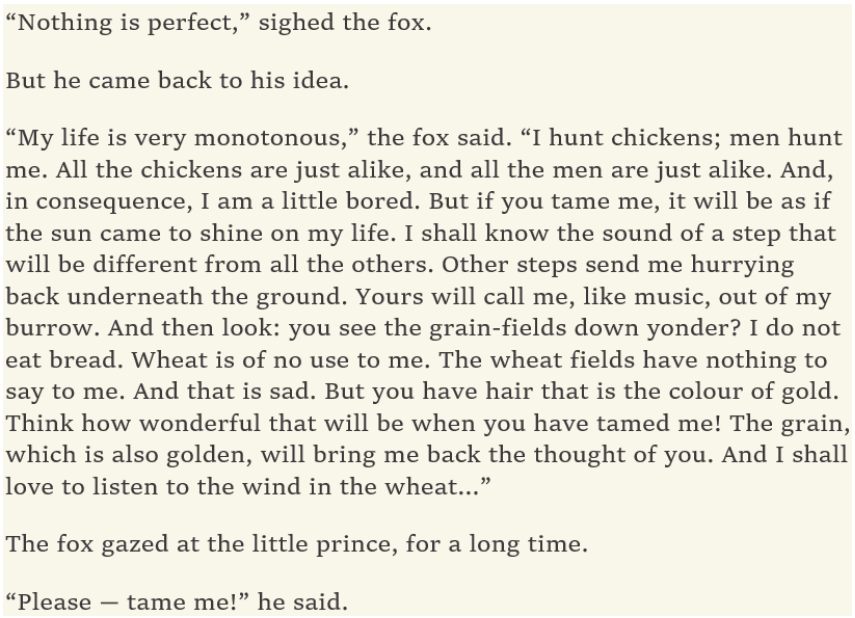
One could therefore say that the poet encounters in the landscape what language has always been: a remainder of a remainder. The ruin remembers a disappearance. **The word remembers a metaphor. Both survive because they have forgotten their beginnings.**



Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). Borges repeatedly returned to themes of memory, oblivion, labyrinths, and traces. In the present article, an allegedly remembered but unverified Borges reference to an old Arabic verse functions as an *aṭlāl* in its own right. The original text remains absent, while only a fragment survives in memory: "*I visited the house of my beloved. Nothing had changed. It*

[13] "Schützenscheibe: Projection, Protection, and the Topology of the Signifier," accessed June 21, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/144303480/Sch%C3%BCtzenscheibe_Projection_Protection_and_the_Topology_of_the_Signifier.

was the same ruin it had always been." Whether authentic or not, the quotation itself has become a remainder. Like the ruins of the beloved's dwelling, it persists not as a complete object but as a trace. In this sense, the forgotten quotation performs the very structure it describes.



"Nothing is perfect," sighed the fox.

But he came back to his idea.

"My life is very monotonous," the fox said. "I hunt chickens; men hunt me. All the chickens are just alike, and all the men are just alike. And, in consequence, I am a little bored. But if you tame me, it will be as if the sun came to shine on my life. I shall know the sound of a step that will be different from all the others. Other steps send me hurrying back underneath the ground. Yours will call me, like music, out of my burrow. And then look: you see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the colour of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me! The grain, which is also golden, will bring me back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat..."

The fox gazed at the little prince, for a long time.

"Please — tame me!" he said.

The Fox and the Little Prince. Saint Exupéry's fox offers a modern version of *aṭlāl*. Before the encounter, the wheat field is meaningless. Afterwards, its golden color recalls the Little Prince. Nothing in the field has changed, yet everything has changed. This is the logic of re-membering. The absent beloved does not return directly. Instead, fragments of the world become attached to his memory. The wheat becomes a trace. The trace awakens the whole.

Like the poet standing before the ruins of *aṭlāl*, the fox discovers that absence ***leaves*** behind a landscape that remembers. Yet hidden within *leaves* is another possibility: absence also ***lives*** behind. The beloved is gone, but something of him continues to inhabit the world through traces. Such unnoticed homophonies are themselves linguistic *aṭlāl*: small ruins of forgotten meanings surviving within words. To re-member them is one of the tasks of *Mardomkavi*.

The word remember is usually understood as a mental act. Yet the word itself invites another reading: To re-member. To assemble the members once again. To restore limbs to a body. To gather scattered fragments and produce a temporary whole. Remembering is therefore not the recovery of a lost object. It is the reconstruction of a body from its remains: re-membering.

The poet standing before the ruins is engaged in precisely this operation. The beloved is gone. The tribe is gone. The tents are gone. The world itself has vanished. Only fragments remain. Poetry becomes an act of re membering.

Perhaps this is also why the famous Muʿallaqat معلقـــات have been misunderstood. They are usually translated as "The Hanging Poems." The translation is not entirely wrong, but it loses something essential. The Arabic root does not merely suggest hanging. It suggests suspension, attachment, lingering between states. A Muʿallaqa is not simply a poem hanging from a wall. It is a

poem suspended between presence and absence, memory and oblivion, appearance and disappearance. The poem itself becomes an aṭlāl . Lyrical isn't it? The ruin is the poem of the house. The poem is the ruin of love. Both are traces. Both preserve by losing. Both remember by forgetting. Like every signifier, they reveal and conceal at the same time. The poem does not merely describe an aṭlāl. The poem becomes one. This is why it is called so: *aṭlāl* (lit. ruin).

Odd = Even + Odd

Every odd number can be written as an even number plus one. Yet the number one occupies a special place.

$$1 = 0 + 1$$

and zero is itself a kind of absence.

Thus the first odd number emerges directly from the encounter of nothingness and remainder. One is not merely another odd number. It is oddness itself. Unlike all other odd numbers, it contains no balanced pair from which a remainder survives. It is pure remainder.

In Persian and Arabic, fard فرد means both odd and solitary. The number one is therefore the first fard: the first solitary survivor. All subsequent odd numbers merely repeat its structure. Five is two pairs plus one. Seven is three pairs plus one. The remainder persists.

In English, the word *odd* means both strange and uneven. More importantly, it refers to a number that leaves a remainder when divided by two. Five becomes two plus two plus one. Seven becomes three plus three plus one. Nine becomes four plus four plus one. Something remains. The odd number refuses complete symmetry. The mathematical and existential meanings converge. An odd number is a solitary survivor. The remainder acquires numerical form.

I have to repeat myself: Suddenly the lonely poet standing among the ruins appears less accidental. The tribe has departed. The couples have departed. The camp has disappeared. Yet one figure remains: The poet himself occupies the position of the odd number. **He has become the remainder.** This may explain why odd numbers have always carried an aura of mystery. They preserve an excess that refuses incorporation into the whole. Their singularity lies not in what they contain but in what they cannot get rid of.

The same structure reappears in political economy and psychoanalysis. Marx discovered surplus value. Lacan discovered surplus enjoyment. Neither system operates because it achieves completion. It operates because something remains unfinished. The remainder is not a defect. The remainder is the engine.

The same principle appears in irrational numbers. In a recent article on the Spiral of Theodorus[14] and Dedekind cuts[15], I argued that the most remarkable feature of irrational numbers is not their irrationality but the persistence of a remainder. One writes 1.4, then 1.41, then 1.414, then 1.4142. Precision increases indefinitely, yet something survives every operation: **The remainder becomes the condition for the next approximation.** The process continues because completion never arrives.

Desire unfolds in the same manner. So do memory, interpretation, and culture itself. Every recollection leaves a remainder. Every reading leaves a remainder. Every civilization leaves a remainder. The Bedouin poet discovers through experience what Dedekind later discovers through number theory and what psychoanalysis rediscovers through desire: Something always remains. The process advances because the gap never closes. From this perspective, *aṭlāl* is not merely a literary convention. It is an anthropology of the remainder and could be understand through *mardomkavi* or ethno-topology.[16]

The ruin is not the opposite of the house. The ruin is the truth of the house. And perhaps this is why the great Arabic poems begin not with the beloved but with her ruins. Love ends. Presence ends. Empires end. But remainders persist. The history of culture may ultimately be nothing other than the history of those things that refuse to disappear.

Addendum: Architecture Against the Ruin

The argument developed in the preceding pages may allow us to revisit an observation made by architect Claudio Sgarbi. According to Sgarbi, if I understand it correctly, architecture does not merely *construct*. Its deeper function is to *cover*. Architecture emerges as an attempt to conceal the ruin, the soil, the earth beneath our feet.

At first glance this statement appears paradoxical. We usually imagine a sequence in which a house is built, deteriorates, and eventually becomes a ruin. The ruin appears as the failure or endpoint of architecture. He, like the logic of *aṭlāl* suggests the opposite. The ruin is not what remains after architecture fails. The ruin is what architecture was trying to conceal from the beginning. **The ruin is not the end of the house. The ruin is the truth of the house.**

Every building begins by covering something. A grave covers a corpse. A house covers the ground. A city covers a landscape. Culture covers nature. The symbolic covers the Real. We live among walls and gradually forget the earth beneath them. We inhabit rooms and forget the soil that supports them.

---

[14] "The Persistence of the Remainder Fibonacci, Theodorus, and the Desire for Precision," accessed June 21, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/168485065/The_Persistence_of_the_Remainder_Fibonacci_Theodorus_and_the_Desire_for_Precision.

[15] "Réel," accessed June 21, 2026, https://www.academia.edu/168304897/R%C3%A9el.

[16] Donald Kunze, *Inversive Geometry for Lacan's (Ethno-)Topology*, 2024, 08:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5DbzdfioN_w.

Architecture therefore functions as a form of *repression* in the Freudian sense of the word. It allows us to forget what sustains us. The foundation itself disappears from view. The more successful the building becomes, the more invisible its ground becomes.

Again, the poet of *aṭlāl* returns precisely to the point where this operation has failed. The walls have vanished. The tents have vanished. The covering has disappeared. The earth returns. What fascinates the poet is therefore not destruction but revelation. The ruin reveals what the building had hidden.

The same structure appears in mathematics. A Dedekind cut does not create irrationality. It reveals a gap that was already there. The cut merely exposes a discontinuity hidden within the apparent continuity of number. Likewise, the ruin does not create incompleteness. The ruin exposes an incompleteness that was already present beneath the apparent completeness of architecture. The house appears complete only because the cut has been covered. The ruin exposes the cut once again. This is why ruins exert such a peculiar fascination. We are attracted to them because they make visible what ordinary architecture successfully conceals: The unfinishedness of every symbolic order.

Seen from this perspective, the Bedouin poet standing before the ruins is not simply remembering a lost beloved. He is witnessing the return of the ground itself. The disappearance of the house or the tent allows something more primordial to appear. What returns is not merely the earth beneath the house but the condition beneath every human construction: Death.

The ruin therefore occupies a privileged place within culture. It is neither pure destruction nor pure preservation. It is the moment when the covering becomes transparent. The moment when the Real shines through the symbolic. The moment when the ground beneath our certainties becomes visible.

Culture may be understood as the art of forgetting the remainder. Poetry may be understood as the art of re-membering it.

Architecture covers the wound. The ruin reveals it.

And the poet, standing alone among the traces of a vanished camp, becomes perhaps the first archaeologist of the absence.